

WSHL WESTERN DIVISION QUARTERFINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

#5 PHOENIX KNIGHTS @ #4 VALENCIA FLYERS

Best-of-three series/all games at Ice Station – Valencia, CA

GAME 1 Thursday, March 15 7:15 p.m.

GAME 2 Friday, March 25 7:15 p.m.

GAME 3* Saturday, March 26 8:45 p.m.

**if necessary*

SEASON SERIES

Valencia 5-3-1, 11 points

Phoenix 4-5-0, 8 points

September 29 Valencia 9 @ Phoenix 2

September 30 Valencia 4 @ Phoenix 1

October 1 Valencia 4 @ Phoenix 0

January 11 Phoenix 0 @ Valencia 5

January 12 Phoenix 5 @ Valencia 9

January 13 Phoenix 5 @ Valencia 3

February 9 Valencia 2 @ Phoenix 5
February 10 Valencia 3 @ Phoenix 5
February 11 Valencia 4 @ Phoenix 5 (OT)

PLAYOFF HISTORY

Valencia – Valencia is used to skipping past the first round, as it secured a bye in each of the previous three seasons. The Flyers are coming off a Thorne Cup semifinal loss last season to Idaho. They actually lost to Long Beach in the Western Division finals but qualified for the tournament as the wild card team. Valencia has made it to the division finals on four separate occasions over the last six seasons but has had its season end there each time.

Phoenix – The Knights have missed out on the playoffs twice in the last four years, including last season when they finished in seventh place in the then-eight-team Western Division. Phoenix hasn't had much success in the postseason other than 2013-14, when they won the Mountain Division and made it all the way to the Thorne Cup semifinal, falling to eventual champion El Paso. While the Knights franchise hasn't done much in the postseason, the Phoenix Polar Bears' seven Thorne Cup titles from 2001-10 are the most in WSHL history.

VALENCIA FLYERS

Head coach: Josh Berge
25-22-4, 4th place – Western Division
242 GF / 215 GA

VALENCIA SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 54/221 (24.4%, 8th in WSHL)
PENALTY KILL 139/289 (73.5%, 18th in WSHL – 9 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Dylan San Augustin (19-22-41), F Tristan Warr (15-16-31), F Jacob Ulestig (14-15-29), F Alex Yuk (1-6-7 in 11 GP), D Daniel Klinecky (20-31-51), G Zachary Everett (8-4-0/3.56/.896), G Mack Willy (1-7-1/4.35/.895)

PHOENIX KNIGHTS

Head coach: Colten St. Clair
23-26-2, 5th place– Western Division
171 GF / 240 GA

PHOENIX SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 37/235 (15.7%, 20th in WSHL)
PENALTY KILL 170/215 (79.1%, 13th in WSHL – 11 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Anthony Masanotti (40-16-56, most single-season goals in franchise history), F

Michael Caravella (13-38-51), F Andrius Bermejo (15-35-50), F Nolan Twerdoclib (11-21-32), F Ian McCollum (18-11-29), D Chase Gillaspie (2-11-13), G Rhett Bruckner (16-8-2/4.06/.889

ANALYSIS

After the first month of the regular season, who would have guessed that these teams would match up in the first round? The Knights were reeling, searching for their first win of the season while the Flyers seemed to be the only competition Long Beach had for the top spot in the Western Division. Much has changed since then, and Phoenix and Valencia are set to engage each other in the playoffs for the first time.

For these two clubs, it really is a tale of two halves of the season. After realizing it likely wouldn't be able to contend for the division crown, Valencia chose to tear down its roster and build for the future. Phoenix, on the other hand, recovered from a disastrous start to the season that saw it drop its first 15 games to show it possesses much more talent than its overall season record would indicate.

One look at the season series gives a clear representation of what happened over the last five months. Valencia dominated early, winning the first five games, but Phoenix came back strong and took the last four contests, including a 5-4 overtime thriller on February 11. If that game was any indication of what this series will be like, then WSHL fans will be in for a treat when the pucks drops on Thursday evening.

The Knights have not had playoff success recently, failing to win a postseason series in each of the last four seasons. Overall, Phoenix has either missed out on the playoffs or fell in the first round in five of its six years of existence. Led by 40-goal scorer Anthony Masanotti, the Knights are looking to flip the script this year and take down the Flyers.

Valencia's roster was littered with veteran players prior to the trade deadline, but the club did not meet its own high expectations. That resulted in a fire sale that saw long-time Flyers such as WSHL all-time leading scorer Jakob Kranabetter and four-year veteran Dawson Keay depart for other contending teams around the league.

This series features two clubs in very different situations that are still quite evenly matched. The up-and-coming Knights are a great matchup for the Flyers, who are in the early stages of a rebuild but still feature plenty of talent, including offensive-minded blueliner Daniel Klinecky. The 20-year-old collected 51 points in the regular season, putting him just outside the top five in scoring among defensemen in the league.

Heading into the series, it would be a surprise to see either team win back-to-back games. The matchup seems destined to go the full three games, and both clubs are fully capable of advancing to the Western Division semifinals. Valencia's hometown fans will give it a slight edge in a series in which neither team seems to have a clear advantage, but the Knights are hungry for playoff success and will be a tough out.

--- *Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media*